

A top-down view of a white ceramic bowl filled with a thick, yellow soup, likely butternut squash. A silver spoon with an ornate handle is partially submerged in the soup on the left side. The soup is garnished with a small pat of white butter in the center and a sprinkling of black pepper. The bowl sits on a dark brown wooden surface with visible grain. Overlaid on the image is the text "When I'm bored I make" in a white script font, followed by the word "SOUP" in large, bold, white capital letters.

When I'm bored I make
SOUP

Peter Coulter

Soup is surely the ultimate food. From the poorest of the poor standing in the street beside a soup kitchen to the richest of the rich at a posh dinner party, we can all eat soup. Be it a hot Mediterranean summers day or a cold wet Scottish autumn one there is a soup that is just right. It will match your mood – from comforting and warm to spicy and exotic, full of unknown promise like a first date. Feeling alone and miserable? Just cuddle up to a bowl of soup by the fire, watch the telly and stuff the world out there. Or have friends round for lunch and put a panfull of soup on the table surrounded by bread, cheese and beer and let everybody help themselves. In a hurry? Make it instantly from a packet all glutinous and full of strange plasticky vegetables. Or take your time, like I will today and make a big pan full of velvety pumpkin soup for the family tonight. It will bubble away quietly while I get on with other things and if anybody is late, no worries, it only gets better whilst sitting keeping warm.

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Peter Coulter

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Beginnings

Perhaps it all started with the Clangers blue string soup. It was certainly fed by Nadine Abensurs' carrot and almond soup recipe and Nigel Slaters' lentil soup. And I am sure that my Scottish upbringing, with its emphasis on tradition and not wasting anything has helped, but whatever it was that started me off on this path, for as long as I can remember I have always made soup. But there is more to it than that

At one time I had a go at painting. Watercolour was my chosen medium and after splashing around a bit I thought I should learn some more. So I bought a book. It was by Alwyn Crawshaw, and although as with most things I soon drifted off to try something else I still remember the first exercise. It was to paint a picture of a potato. Why? Well this was the clever part, as Alwyn explained when you first start you want to achieve something and you are very sensitive to criticism from yourself as well as others. So a potato is the perfect first model. One potato looks pretty much like another, so you can experiment as much as you like and still come out with something recognisable at the end.

And Soup? Well apart from the fact that you can put potatoes in it, if you are a beginner or have never strayed from a recipe then the same idea applies, you want to achieve something. And of all the things you could cook I think soup is the most easy going. You can experiment as much as you like and will just about always end up with something edible. And even if your creation is just the wrong side of interesting to eat, all you'll have lost is a few vegetables.



Taste

Nowadays we are so used to getting food pre-prepared, ready to eat, that we hardly consider how it gets there. You order it over the phone or internet, or you open the tin and warm it through, or you take it out of the freezer and microwave it, and hey presto or “ding” should I say, there it is on your plate ready to eat. Even recipes are pretty foolproof, you could probably go from start to finish without tasting and the end result would be fine.

But that is not what we are after here. No, we are constructing something from scratch, so taste everything all the way through. Watch how the flavours change, how the stock overpowers everything at the beginning but then mellows during cooking as the other flavours develop and come through.

And think about what you’re tasting, is it nice? Is it what you expected? Does it need something else?

If it does you’ll know, you may not know what, but you will know that the taste is not quite right. Here is where I experiment. I’ll take a spoonful and add a little bit to that spoonful, say yoghurt perhaps or lemon juice or some feta cheese. Then I’ll taste that and if it works – fine, if not I still have my soup. This way you’ll learn what works and what doesn’t, and gather a whole lot of ideas that work (or don’t) for the future.



The First Step

Ok, so you have decided to cook something. But the whole world is out there or at least the contents of your fridge. So where are you going to start?

All soups I make start with the main ingredient. This is what the soup will be called, what it will taste of. So think about it. What do you feel like eating? Who is it for? Yourself, the family, or do you need something a bit different for guests. Or sometimes even - what is in the fridge, what needs eating up before it spoils.

One main ingredient is fine, carrots say, or pumpkin or spinach. But if you stop to think about what cooking is actually all about, then things get more interesting. What might be obvious to most people came as a surprise to me, - all cookery is, is the mixing and blending of flavours to make something nice. Texture and colour are important of course but it has to taste nice. All the rest of it, all those methods and rules are just ways to recreate combinations without poisoning anybody. Now obviously the more flavours there are to be balanced, the more difficult it will be, so I tend to limit myself to no more than two or at most three main flavours. You can probably think of a few classic examples, leek and potato say or carrot and coriander or pea and ham, but there are lots more out there waiting to be discovered. All that those cookery books on the shelf are, are just lists of flavour combinations that people have written down over the years.



Not all main ingredients are cooked from the beginning. Some, like fresh herbs just need warming through so they keep that freshness or others like cheese would spoil if over cooked. But more of that later, because although a soup starts with the main ingredient that is not the first thing you actually do.

All my soups start with the “base”.



The Base

You could make a soup with just carrots and water, and very nice it would be I am sure but rather plain and one dimensional. This is where the base of a soup comes in. Along with the stock, the base adds a depth and background to the flavour of those main ingredients, subtly complementing and bringing out the best in them.

In the west most recipes use onions or something similar, leeks say or shallots or celery. Bacon as well, if you eat it would go in as part of the base, to be chopped and cooked slowly in a little oil or butter until it all becomes fragrant. This will usually take a good ten minutes or more, the onions should become translucent and start to turn faintly golden brown. Keep the heat low during this so that it does not burn, because burnt onions will overpower the whole thing. If it does burn, because you know that the phone will ring at just the wrong moment, then just throw it out, wash the pan and start again, it is no big deal.

While the base is cooking I usually peel and chop my main ingredients ready to be stirred in and allowed to cook for a few minutes before adding the stock. I say stock but any liquid could be used, from water through to beer, wine, milk or a combination, it all depends on what you feel like, what you are making.

Once the stock is in, bring it to simmer - a gentle bubble really and leave until it is all cooked, twenty minutes to half an hour for most vegetables, but bite a bit to see.



Stock

Open any cook book and you will often read :-

“A good homemade stock is the essential basis for any soup”

Well actually no, I disagree. I want my soup now, for lunch today not in three hours once I have made stock, and I am certainly not organised enough to start preparations days ahead. Remember it is about taste. The problem with most readymade stock cubes is that they are too strong and will overpower everything else. So find something that is a bit more subtle. I use an organic vegetable stock powder – Rapunzel here in New Zealand, and I used Marigold in the UK but see what you can find. And I go further, after reading Cranks Fast Food by Nadine Abensur I only ever mix stock half strength, a powder makes this quite easy.

This works for most western soups where the ingredients are cooked slowly, but Asian inspired soups tend to be made from mostly stock with a few fresh ingredients cooked more quickly. So here the stock plays a bigger part and this is where I would use a homemade stock, and the only one I ever make is chicken, by far the easiest to make especially if you have had roast chicken on a Sunday.

Mind you, sometimes all you want is that salty artificial hit that only a stock cube can give, and if that is the case – go for it I say.



Texture

Once all the ingredients are cooked to your liking, the soup is pretty well made and you can stop here and eat it.

I like to go one step further and usually blend or liquidise all my soups. This is just personal preference, I just like an overall even texture to which I can add other things just before serving or at the table. I am thinking of herbs like parsley or coriander or a crumbled cheese like feta (one of my favourites). There is more on this later.

The texture of your soup can be varied depending on what you use to thicken it. This can be the main ingredient – pumpkin makes a beautiful velvety soup, carrot a slightly coarser one. If this main ingredient does not provide enough texture, then add something. A potato added at the beginning gives a floury texture, a dessertspoonful or so of flour added to the base will give a drier more sauce like consistency and white flour and wholemeal will give slightly different flavours as well. Corn flour added at the end will make a slightly more glutinous one, so experiment. Don't add the corn flour directly to the pan or you will get lumps. Mix a couple of teaspoonfuls with some cold water in a cup, then gradually warm it by adding some soup before pouring it into the saucepan. Stir and reheat until the corn flour goes from milky to clear and thickens.

Crunchiness can be got by adding more vegetables at the end, cooked separately or cut thinly and left raw, just put them in bowls and pour the soup over as you serve.



Let's eat

As I have mentioned earlier the final tweaking of the flavour is done once the soup is cooked, either just before serving or by each person themselves at the table – audience participation!

Soft green herbs like parsley, coriander and mint will retain their greenness and fresh flavour this way. Spices can be gently fried in butter then added. Lemons and limes can be quartered ready to squeeze in. Cheese will go stringy if boiled so add it as you reheat the soup or put it in bowls on the table for people to add themselves.

Croutons add a nice crunchiness – cut some bread roughly into half inch cubes, roll around in olive oil and put on a tray in a hot oven, say 190 centigrade until golden brown. Watch them carefully as they will quickly burn. Put them in a bowl on the table and salt them. Try not to eat them all before the soup is ready.

Cream and coconut milk can be mixed in the pan or swirled into individual bowls. A salsa can be made with tomatoes, spring onions, chilli, coriander and lemon juice all chopped up. Do this while the soup is cooking and leave it to sit so the flavours get a chance to mix together.

Whatever comes to your mind when you taste your soup, can be added. If you are not sure, try a little bit on a spoon or in a bowl first – remember be bold, experiment!



And if it all goes horribly wrong?

Once cooked major mistakes are difficult to correct, but there is really only one of them, most other things can be fixed. Too salty or peppery - best just accept it, apologise, and serve lots to drink. Too bitter - If you have burnt the onions at the start then that flavour will overpower everything, so the only thing to do is start again. Do this as soon as you notice, there is no point in continuing. Some vegetables like red peppers, courgettes and aubergines have a bitterness to them that I personally don't like, but some people do. Roasting these ones first, then making your soup will reduce this bitterness as well as intensifying their flavour – roll them in some olive oil, garlic and herbs like in the tomato sauce recipe. Too bland – if it's because the soup is just too watery then turn the heat up and boil it more rapidly until it thickens. If it is just your choice of ingredients, then either go with the blandness and add cream or mascarpone or spice it up with some gently fried spices added just before serving or else contrast it by serving with something zingy like a salsa.

Most vegetable soups will take an hour to make all in. If you're making bread as well then allow an hour and a half. Put the oven on to heat so that the bread can go in a quarter of an hour before serving.

Recipes

Now for some recipes. These were originally written for my blog and were written just as I went along, so there are no separate lists of ingredients and method as such. Including them this way is deliberate, because I want you to think about what you are doing, to go through the recipe and write it out yourself picking out the main parts – main ingredient, base and thickening.

Don't worry if you do not have all of the ingredients, use what you have, taking my recipe as a starting point to create your own.

Remember - have fun, after all it's only a bowl of soup.



Pumpkin Soup

We emigrated to New Zealand from The Scottish Borders about three years ago and one of the best discoveries here has been Pumpkin Soup. Scotch Broth is comforting on a cold winters day but pumpkin soup with its gently caressing texture takes comfort to a new level.

Here is the recipe that I use

1/2 onion, 1 clove garlic

- fry gently 5 minutes or so in oil and 1/4" slice butter till onion is clear
- cut say a 3" piece of pumpkin scoop out seeds and peel
- turn up heat, add pumpkin and stir till pumpkin browns and blackens at the edges
- add 1 1/4 pints 1/2 strength vegetable stock (say 1 dsp stock powder or 1/2 a stock cube)
- add a tomato or two chopped or 1/3 tin tomatoes drained
- reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes or so until the pumpkin is nice and soft.
- cool a little, then liquidise
- salt, pepper to taste and adjust thickness with more stock if necessary – it should be thickish and velvety.

This is the basic recipe.



Today I added the following

1/2 a cinnamon stick

1 tsp black mustard seeds

1 tsp fennel seeds

1 finely chopped small red chilli

- fry all these very gently in a slice of butter and some oil, going carefully so as not to burn the spices or the butter.

- take off the heat and add –

1tsp ground cumin

1 tsp ground coriander

1/2 tsp of turmeric

- allow to warm through and add to the soup

If you have no spices just add say a teaspoon or so of curry powder to taste to the soup or warmed it in butter first.

You can vary the soup as you feel eg-

- add some bacon with the onions at the beginning

- a big handfull of spinach with the stock

- any vegetables you fancy could go in with the pumpkin eg carrots or celery or courgettes, whatever. I would probably only go for one other to keep the flavour clean.



Spinach Soup and Tortillas

Nothing much in the fridge today, just half a bag of baby spinach past its best, so spinach soup it is.

- The usual recipe - half an onion and a clove of garlic sweated slowly in some oil and butter.
- One potato chopped and added for thickening, then a pint and a quarter of stock. Home made chicken stock would be nice here but there is none left in the freezer so half strength Rapunzel's vegetable bouillon it is.
- Twenty minutes or so later once the potato is cooked add the spinach - a couple of big handfuls.
- Simmer for a minute or so then blend.
- Back in the washed pan it goes along with black pepper, a little salt and 'cos it seemed a bit thin - some milk, so cream of spinach soup now.

As beautifully green as a stagnant pond in spring time, maybe a little bit stocky tasting but served with some salty feta, absolutely delicious.

And tortillas as well (no bread left either!) dead easy to make - just flour salt and water, kneaded into a soft dough, rested for twenty minutes then rolled out thin and cooked in a dry frying pan 'till speckled brown.



I love old traditional recipes; they make the most of simple ingredients, appealing I think to my Aberdonian Scottish ancestry from my mums side! And as the man on the advert says "when disaster strikes will you be ready, will you have a plan". Well I am working on it. We may be sitting in rags amid the rubble of our lives but the cats will be dispatched to find fresh meat and if I can find a bag of flour we'll be eating rabbit kebabs skewered on rosemary stems and wrapped in tortillas before you know it.

Just need to train the cats now.



Red Pepper Soup with a Cucumber Salsa

Now I am not a great fan of pepper soup, I find it a bit bitter, but roast them till charred and the flavour is much better. Today I had a go at a roasted pepper soup. With only one and a half red peppers you're not going to get much but 3/4 of a pint is enough for two for lunch (or one piggy Peter).

- Peppers are sliced up into chunks, mixed with some olive oil, a couple of garlic cloves, a bunch of thyme, and salt and pepper and then popped into a hot oven for half an hour or so until blackened at the edges.
- Meanwhile half a chopped onion was cooking slowly in oil in a pan - I wanted the sweetness of the onion without any burning.
- Peeling the peppers is slimily messy but I quite enjoy it now. They go in with the onions along with the squeezed out garlic cloves and the peppery orange oil from roasting, trying to keep back the thyme stems.
- A small potato, chopped, goes in for thickening, half a small red chilli for a bit of a kick and a pint of half strength vegetable stock as usual.
- Simmer till the potato is soft and liquidise till smooth.
- Season, mine needed a little salt and finally a drop of cream.

The colour is beautiful, orangey with some black specks from the bits of burnt pepper skin that sneaked in. And it tastes rather good, the red peppers coming through mild and creamy.



The chilli was a bit fiery though, hence the cream. But when that didn't work I was left gazing idly into the fridge wondering . . . and there was a cool cucumber looking back at me. So a sort of salsa made with chopped cucumber, lemon juice and chopped mint leaves all mixed together. Now we are getting there, and you know although I don't really do "restaurant food" this is pretty damned close.



Leek Walnut and Coconut Soup

I woke up thinking about this one. Knowing that there was a leek in the larder about to expire started it off course and once my mind started thinking of things that leeks go with, well this was the result.

- First the leek and half an onion, both chopped were cooked slowly in some olive oil until nicely soft - about fifteen minutes.
- Meanwhile I shelled about six walnuts, bashed them to a powder inside a plastic bag and then put them aside to soak in a bowl with a little stock, just enough to cover them.
- Stir a tablespoon of wholemeal flour into the onion and leek, turning the heat up a little to cook the flour for a couple of minutes.
- In goes three quarters of a pint of half strength vegetable stock and the whole thing left to cook, twenty minutes or so.
- Next I put the walnuts into the liquidiser to grind them up a bit more followed gradually by the rest of the soup
- Finally it all goes back into the cleaned saucepan to reheat along with about a third of a tin of coconut milk and perhaps a little salt.

We had ours next day for lunch with some squashy cheese scones still warm from the oven.



Pumpkin and Cashew Nut Soup

There is a chill in the air telling me that although I cannot see it on this bright fresh day, winter is still here. Time for another creamy, comforting soup once again making good use of the warming fragrance of black pepper.

- An onion and a clove of garlic are set to cook slowly in some olive oil.
- About two ounces of roasted cashew nut are put into a small ziplock bag and bashed with a rolling pin to a lumpy flour. I used my youngest for this as it is the school holidays and he was looking bored. (he did the bashing that is, I didn't use him as the rolling pin)
- Pop the nuts into a small amount of stock and leave to soak.
- Meanwhile I have peeled a three or four inch piece of pumpkin and chopped it into chunks.
- Now the last time I made soup I burnt the onions when I added the pumpkin and upped the heat, so this time I scooped out the onions before turning up the heat, then put the pumpkin in and stirred it around a bit until blackened at the edges.
- The onions go back in along with a pint and a quarter of vegetable stock and the heat turned down to a simmer.
- Twenty minutes later all is cooked.
- Into the liquidiser go the cashews and their stock to whizz them a bit finer then the soup is added and blended together.
- Back into the cleaned saucepan it all goes with a little bit of salt and lots of black pepper to warm through.



Kumara and Coconut Soup

For Christmas this year Nicola's work took us all out to Glen Etive restaurant in Hastings. After the bread and dips the soup came along – Kumara and Coconut. Kumara are of course a sweet potato grown in New Zealand, having originally been brought here by early Maori settlers, and make a beautiful, delicately comforting soup with a floury texture. This is my version, the restaurant one was fairly plain but as it's raining, and with me being a bit bunged up with flu, I have put ginger in mine to give a warming background.

- One small chopped onion goes into some oil and butter in a pan along with a crushed clove of garlic and a walnut sized piece of ginger, also peeled and chopped
- This is left to cook gently while the kettle boils for the stock and the Kumara are peeled.

Kumara are come in different colours inside, red orange and white, so I chose the red skinned ones thinking the orange flesh would make a nice looking soup. But . . . of course when I peeled them they are white inside. But there you go, should have bought the orange ones!

- Once the onions are translucent turn the heat up a bit and add the peeled and roughly chopped Kumara along with a quarter teaspoon of Turmeric.
- Stir everything around a bit and add a pint and a quarter of vegetable stock.



- Now just turn the heat down and leave to simmer until the Kumara are soft, twenty minutes or so.
- Leave to cool for a few minutes then liquidize it all and return to the now washed saucepan.
- taste and season, it will taste quite gingery now.
- pour in half a tin of coconut milk and reheat , if it is like mine the ginger will disappear into the background and the soup will have a gentle Thai influenced flavour. (Nicola likes ginger of course so if you are not sure just use a half walnut sized piece.)

Enjoy – we had ours with some feta, Nicola’s idea – the creamyness and slight citrus tang went together with the Thai influence beautifully.

Potato cakes would also have gone well with it, I think.

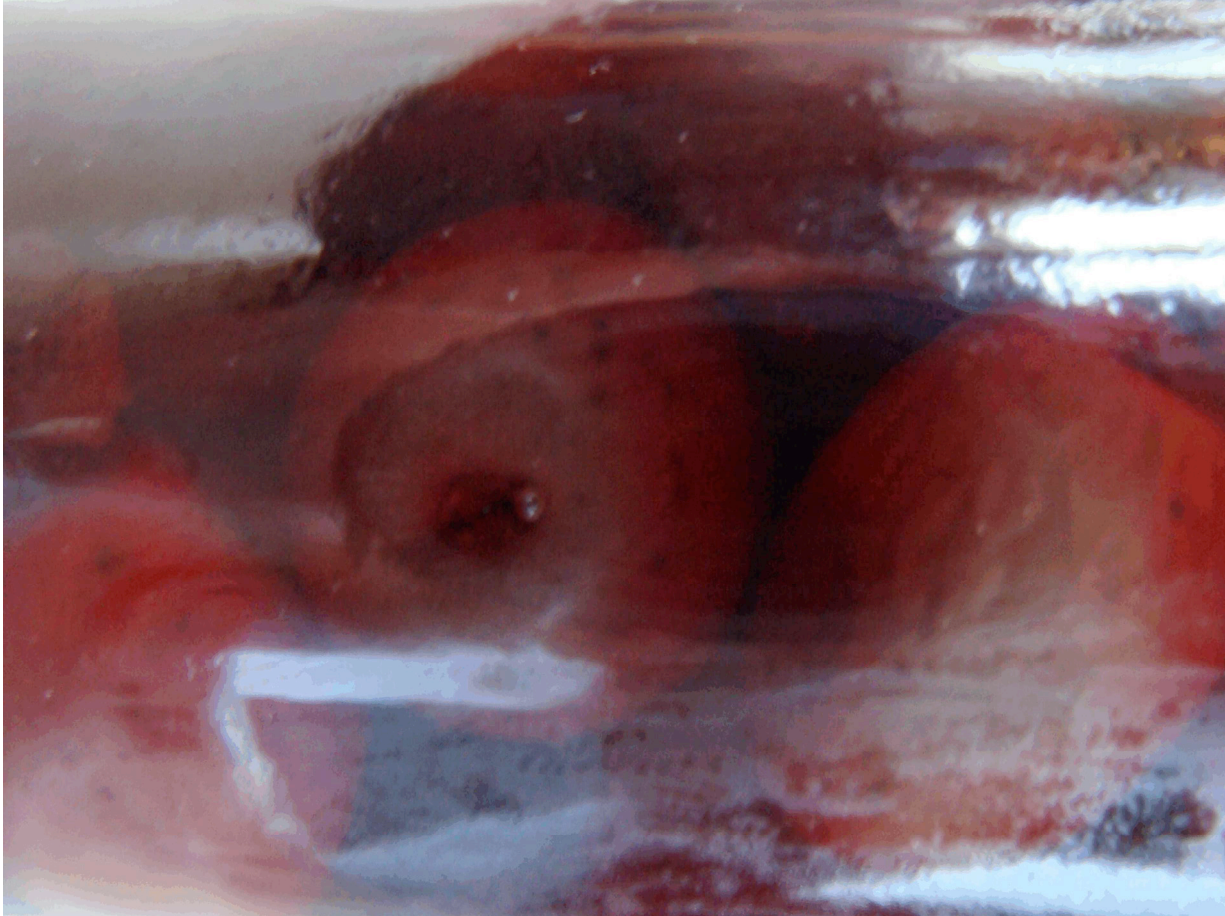


Tomato and Black Olive Soup

Picked a huge bowl full of cherry tomatoes earlier, and there are still lots ripening so I have no guilt about making half of them into a simple tomato soup.

- Half an onion and a clove of garlic are gently fried in some oil and butter till soft.
- Meanwhile peel and chop a couple of small potatoes for thickening and add them to the pan.
- Then the tomatoes – about three pounds in this case, along with a basil leaf or two.
- Stir and mix everything then add some stock, vegetable or in this case some chicken stock from the fridge that Nicola had made. I added a pint but the soup was a bit thin cos of the amount of liquid from the tomatoes and had to be boiled down a bit until it thickened up, so next time I'll only add half a pint I think.
- Anyway, simmer until the tomatoes and potatoes are cooked and soft - about twenty minutes.
- Now the skin and seeds need to be removed which I do by putting a metal sieve over a big jug, pouring in the soup and pushing it through firmly with a wooden spoon.
- Wash the pan and put the soup back in to warm through, season and voila – tomato soup.

And that is how we ate it Nicola and I, sitting outside - a nice simple soup.



But all the way through the cooking I kept thinking it was a bit one dimensional, a thought kept popping into my head - black olives. So today (Sunday) I finally got a jar.
- Draining a handful of olives I chopped and squashed them into a paste, then stirred a small dessertspoonful into the rest of the soup and warmed it through.

Delicious and quite pretty – the reddish orange colour speckled through with aubergine flecks. It will be my lunch tomorrow at work.



Swiss Chard or Silver Beet Soup

Got up this morning thinking of celery soup. Celery soup and walnut bread. Celery and walnuts, a classic combination really. I knew there was some celery in the bottom of the fridge, but when I got there I found that nature had got there first, leaving me with three small stalks and another bag of green soupy mush. Well off to the worm farm for the green mush but what else might be there . . . two slices of bacon, some mushroom stalks (Nicola does not eat the stalks) and, well that's it really apart from potatoes. The lettuce and red peppers are for tea tonight.

Ok so I have the makings of a base for a quite autumny soup.

- 2 slices of bacon, 3 sticks of celery, some mushroom stalks and a peeled potato are chopped and left cooking slowly in some oil while I search for a main ingredient.

And gazing outside I spy Nicola's beautiful swiss chard or silver beet as it is called here. Problem solved.

- Once everything is soft and fragrant add a pint and a quarter of vegetable stock and simmer till the potato is cooked, ten/fifteen minutes or so.
- Now strip the green leaves off the silver beet stems wash them, tear them up small and add to the soup.
- Simmer for another few minutes until cooked, then liquidize the whole lot.
- Put the soup back in the pan to warm through and season – I like quite a lot of black pepper.



The walnut bread is easy to make. I don't really like flavoured breads as such, preferring plain bread with ingredients on top, so I just make some white dough in the bread maker, flatten it out onto a tray and top with some walnuts rolled about in some of olive oil (so that they toast rather than burn) squashed into the dough.

A rather nice soup I must say with a beautiful chard taste and a warm depth of flavour from the base ingredients. Of course the reason the silver beet was there is because I am the only one that likes it! So I'll be freezing some for my lunch next week. And extra earth mother points for me!



Potato and Parsley Soup with Black Peppered bread

Potato soup, another creamy comforting soup - this one with some parsley for freshness.

- heat some oil hot in a saucepan
- add a couple of rashers of bacon chopped anyold how and turn the heat down (if you are vegetarian of course, just miss out the bacon)
- when it is just sizzling add an onion and three small sticks of celery, all chopped
- leave to cook gently until it all smells glorious – a good ten minutes I should think.

You want people to come into the kitchen and ask what you are cooking with a dreamy longing look on their faces.

- Peel and chop three potatoes, add them to the pan and leave for a few more minutes now, stirring to mix and stop it sticking.
- Add a pint and a half of vegetable stock – I used Rapunzel vegetable boullion mixed half strength as usual.
- Once the potatoes are soft, say twenty minutes to half an hour, whiz the lot in a liquidiser
- Bung it back in the pan, check seasoning and add a tablespoon of chopped parsley as you warm it through.



As say, creamy and comforting this one with a hint of onion, celery and bacon for depth. It still needed a bit of a kick though, so I made some bread topped with olive oil and lots of crushed black pepper. The pepper seems to take on a lovely lemony tang when cooked, with a warmth to match the soup.

Strangely enough after I added the parsley the soup took on a slightly fishy taste which gave me an idea. How about this for a dinner party starter – grill some nice firm white fish with salt pepper and butter. Put the soup in some warm shallow bowls and place a fish fillet in the centre with the hot salty peppery butter poured over. Sounds good to me, and I'll probably have a go one day, but not for Nicola – I cannot really describe the shape of her face when I mentioned this idea but it was not encouraging!

Mind you, she also compared my soup to packet soup as well, and I can see what she means, I think it is the onionyness in the background, but there is nothing wrong with packet soup if that is what you want at the time. Or actually I should say there is probably lots wrong with packet soup but I have still eaten it !



Mushroom Soup

Keriann kindly gave us a big bag of mushrooms which was presented to me along with Nicolas request for mushroom soup. – So here it is.

I have made double the quantity (two pints) I usually make cos I had lots of mushrooms and because it is near the end of the month and having no money left, I want something in the freezer to take to work for lunch.

- Into a pan goes some olive oil along with a half inch slice of butter to warm gently.
- Then in goes an onion, a clove of garlic and a stick of celery all roughly chopped.
- Leave to simmer gently until soft
- A pound of mushrooms wiped clean and roughly chopped and a bunch of parsley if you have it are added
- The mushroom have a lot of water so keep simmering until it all evaporates, this takes ages so I usually entertain myself by dancing round the kitchen in my usual manic and rather scary style. ("Walk on By" by The Stranglers was playing. You can find it on Youtube)
- Once the liquid is all gone, or you just get bored waiting, a tablespoon of flour is stirred in and left to cook for a few minutes.
- two and a bit pints of half strength Rapunzel vegetable stock then go in and the whole lot left to cook
- ten to fifteen minutes is probably all that is required.



- I usually liquidize the lot now but you can eat it as it is of course. Oh and check for seasoning, with stock powder it probably will not need any salt but a good few grinds of black pepper are good.
- At this point I usually feel it needs a squeeze of lemon juice. But even better, to give it that citrus edge, serve it with a dollop of Philadelphia. Or yoghurt. Or parmesan perhaps or that Hohepa cheese with cumin seeds in. Or go the other way to creamyness with a splodge of marscapone along with a zingy fresh salsa.
- And some walnut bread of course.

And thinking of walnuts, I have not tried it but I have a feeling that mushroom soup would be good thickened with nuts – walnuts or cashews, in which case I would miss out the flour of course and add the nuts at the end, having ground them and leaving them to soak in some stock whilst the soup cooks.

Mushroom soup – earthy, comforting.



Carrot, Cardamom and Coconut Soup

This is just such a, well there is no other word for it, pretty soup. Pale orange in colour, delicately scented, smooth in texture, just pretty really. I have a recipe for a delicious carrot cake by Madhur Jaffrey that has Indian spices in it and cardamom features heavily, so why not a soup I thought and of course if you are going down the soft creamy route then coconut milk would be an ideal companion.

- start with half an onion and a small clove of garlic, and one or two green cardamom pods gently fried till soft.
- Add in two or three carrots chopped and mix around
- Then a pint and a quarter of half strength vegetable stock
- Simmer until the carrots are soft, half an hour or so
- Fish out the cardamom pods if you like, I left them in, and liquidize it all

This of course gives Carrot and Cardamom soup which is very nice but I went that little bit further and added a small amount of coconut milk, no more than 100ml or so (taste it) – you do not want to overpower with coconut. The rest of the tin I put in a couple of pots and popped in the freezer to see if it will freeze for some other time (it will).

With two pods I thought the cardamom flavour was quite strong and would probably try one pod next time, but Nicola said she could not taste it at all. Mind you she is bunged up with flu at the moment.

We had ours with toast cos there is a lot of bread to eat up but better I think would be some sort of thin, slightly crispy flatbread or potato cake, perhaps next time.



Bread

Bread of course is the ideal accompaniment to any soup. There is a lot of mysticism attached to bread making, but a simple flat loaf is fairly straightforward to make. A couple of ingredients will make the result more predictable. Firstly, use a strong or breadmaking flour. This has more gluten and makes a more springy dough, so trapping more bubbles and giving a lighter loaf. Secondly use a dried yeast with flour improvers in. Here in New Zealand it is called "Surebake" but there will be a type in your supermarket, usually next to the flour. You can use ordinary plain flour and normal dried yeast but I find that it makes a more solid loaf. Finally, and this is probably the most important part, remember that your dough is alive! So keep it warm and always treat it gently but firmly.

For a small bread, enough for two or three people, take a warm mixing bowl and pour in two cupfuls of flour. Add in a teaspoonful and a half of yeast, a teaspoonful of salt and the same of sugar or honey. Mix them all around a bit then add in 200ml of warm water. That is warm to the touch but not hot, blood heat I suppose. Mix it all together and you will get a sticky dough. Tip this out onto a floured surface and knead it. You can look up any bread book for how to knead, but basically you flatten out your ball of dough from the middle with your hands then fold it back into the middle and stretch it out again. Do this for a good ten minutes, gently but firmly - it should become smooth and elastic. If the dough is quite wet then use some sort of spatula to knead it with, scooping it from the outside over and into the middle. It will pick up more flour as you work it and get drier.



Now put some olive oil into a bowl, pop the dough ball in and roll it around a bit. Cover the bowl with Gladwrap (clingfilm) or a damp tea towel and place the bowl somewhere warm for an hour. I use the airing cupboard or a sunny windowsill. The dough will get bigger eventually threatening to engulf the whole bowl!

Put the oven on, I use 190 centigrade. Flour a baking sheet or tray and tip the dough out onto it. Knead it a bit and flatten it out to about ½ an inch thick. Pop it in the middle or bottom of the oven for about ten minutes until cooked and as brown as you like.

I am not a great fan of flavoured breads but I do like toppings – walnuts, cheese, garlic, onions, herbs, olives etc, etc. To stop the drier toppings burning I mix them in a bowl with some olive oil and spread that on the bread before it goes in the oven, pressing it all in as much as possible. Walnuts will come out beautifully toasted this way. They tend to drop off again once cooked, but you are going to pick at them and nibble anyway so it makes little difference.

That's all there is to it really. The kitchen will smell glorious.



Roast Tomato Sauce

Here is a quick and easy roast tomato sauce that I make quite often. Great for tomatoes in the fridge that have just gone past their best.

Put the oven on to its hottest.

- Then in an oven proof bowl put –
- a handful of tomatoes, cherry left whole, bigger ones cut into chunks
- a clove of garlic peeled and squashed
- a bunch of thyme
- salt and pepper

Mix a tablespoon or so of olive oil through and bung in the oven.

Twenty minutes to half an hour later when the tomato skins are blackening and the kitchen smells like a Mediterranean holiday, take the bowl out and push the whole lot through a sieve into another bowl.

Makes a great soup mixed with carrot soup or with pasta it becomes more of a coating or glaze than a sauce. It would also make a cool salad dressing I should think with some lemon juice added perhaps.



Chicken Stock

This is the only stock I make myself, mostly because it is dead easy to make and if you roast a chicken for dinner , then you have the main ingredient for stock sitting there all ready. You will also need two or three hours for it to cook and an extractor fan!

So take a big saucepan and put your chicken carcass in it. Now peel an onion and put it in whole along with 6 or 7 peppercorns, a few bay leaves, and some fresh herbs – parsley, thyme, whatever you have in the garden or on the windowsill. Add some more vegetables, again left whole, a tomato or two, a leek or some celery. You can use whichever vegetables you have, I have been known to use left over mushroom stalks. The taste will vary but experiment and find out what you like.

Put in enough water to cover it all, bring to the boil, then turn the heat right down and try to get it so the stock just slowly and gently bubbles. Now leave it for at least two hours to cook, adding a little water if it gets too low. You'll know it is ready because the water will have become a softly savoury stock that you could just drink as it is, but it will not be as strong or as salty as a commercially made product.

Finally put a sieve over a bowl or jug and pour it all through to separate the clear stock off. Throw away all the bits, put the stock in the fridge and next day it will have set to a soft jelly and the fat will be set on top. You can scrape it off if you like.



This is still just the beginning . . .

Hopefully by now some of my childlike enthusiasm for the possibilities of soup will have rubbed off on you. If the pages of this book become well thumbed and the margins full of scribbled notes and ideas, then my work here will be done.

If you would like to explore further in the same vein then here are a couple of books that have inspired me.

"Appetite" by Nigel Slater, whose recipes are always down to earth and full of possibilities.

"Cranks Fast Food" by Nadine Abensur, whose recipe for Carrot and Almond soup that I mentioned back at the beginning is elegant in its simplicity.

I would also love to hear about the ideas for soups that you come up with. You can contact me via the blog that goes with this book at

www.peterssoup.blogspot.com


I look forward to hearing from you.

Peter Coulter 2008



Peter Coulter is not a renowned food critic. He has never run his own restaurant or been food writer for Vogue. But he does like to eat. And because he eats he also cooks. He can often be found cooking for an ordinary family of five in Hawkes Bay, New Zealand.

Whilst cooking he also thinks, and these thoughts get written down. You are holding some of them now.



This is not a cookery book. At least not in the conventional sense. But it will teach you how to cook. And if you are a beginner, or have never strayed from a recipe, or like me have always wondered where recipes come from, then it has been written for you. And if you are a student or just want or need to be economical with your money then you'll want to read it as well, because soup just has to be the cheapest way to produce a nutritious filling meal.

Written in diary style, this book is not full of recipes to be slavishly copied. The instructions are certainly there and you will produce delicious soups, but at the same time you will be encouraged to think about what you are doing and why. And with this knowledge and with further reading you will be able to go on and cook anything you want.

Enjoy . . .

